



Research article

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**DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE WITHIN THE EVANGELICAL
CONTEXT: A CONCISE REEVALUATION**

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ABSTRACT



This study articulates the various evangelical views on divorce and remarriage. Following a critique of these views, a biblical substantiation of a modified Erasmian approach is provided. It is argued that a modified Erasmian viewpoint best accounts for the explicit testimony of Scripture regarding the permissibility of divorce and remarriage within the context of adultery or spousal abandonment while affording divorce and remarriage in extraordinary situations wherein a spouse has engaged in sin that is deserving of capital punishment.

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The permissibility of divorce and remarriage raises a host of exegetical, theological, and practical issues. As the various evangelical approaches demonstrate, divorce and remarriage are perplexing subjects. This study will summarize the current views represented among evangelicals and will provide the biblical and theological justification of a modified Erasmian view. This view permits divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery and abandonment while also affording permission for extraordinary circumstances.

Summary of Views

Among evangelical interpreters, there are five major viewpoints that afford varying levels of permissibility for divorce and remarriage. All five of these views permit divorce in cases where an unbelieving has deserted his or her spouse owing to the Pauline privilege in 1 Corinthians 7:15: “If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.”¹ Additionally, each view affords a widow or widower to remarry following the death of a spouse (Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39). Beyond desertion and the death of a spouse, however, these views differ on other grounds for divorce, if any, and the possibility of remarriage.

The most common view among evangelicals is the “Erasmian view,” named after the sixteenth-century Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus. In *The Institution of Christian Matrimony* (i.e., *Institutio Christiani Matrimonii*), Erasmus argued that Scripture permits divorce in only two circumstances: adultery and desertion.² His inclusion of adultery is derived from Jesus’ exception in Matthew 19:9 (cf. 5:32; Deut. 24:1): “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” While the term translated “sexual immorality” (πορνεία) has a semantic range that includes any illicit activity

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¹ All biblical citations from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

² Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, Vol. 69, eds. John W. O'Malley and Louis Perraud (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 235.



of a sexual nature,³ Erasmus understood the term to refer to extra-marital fornication.⁴ This view was affirmed by the magisterial reformers⁵ and is reflected in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (§24.5).

Wayne Grudem has proposed a modified form of the Erasmian view which affords divorce and remarriage in cases of spousal abuse.⁶ This is a departure from the traditional Erasmian approach Grudem took in his *Christian Ethics*.⁷ In a 2019 presentation given at a regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Grudem argued that the plurality of the phrase translated “In such cases” (ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις) in 1 Corinthians 7:15 affords additional grounds for divorce beyond desertion.⁸

The “patristic view,” so-called due to its representation among the early church,⁹ also interprets πορνεία in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 as a reference to adultery. The view permits divorce on account of adultery, but unlike the Erasmian view, it does not afford remarriage. Interpreters who affirm the patristic view understand Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:32 (cf. 19:9) to preclude remarriage on any grounds, including abandonment: “Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”¹⁰ Therefore, while one may divorce on the basis of adultery or desertion, that person must remain unmarried.

Those who affirm the “permanence view” only permit divorce in cases of desertion but preclude divorce in all other situations. Remarriage of any kind is similarly prohibited.

³ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 854.

⁴ Erasmus, *Collected Works*, 69:260.

⁵ E.g., John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2 Vols., trans. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 1:292-3.

⁶ Cf. the viewpoint articulated in David InStone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 189-214. InStone-Brewer views any violation of marital vows, neglect, and spousal abuse as suitable grounds for divorce and remarriage.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 815-18.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two An Argument for Including Abuse in the Phrase ‘In Such Cases’ in 1 Corinthians 7:15.” Last modified November 21, 2019. <http://www.waynegrudem.com/grounds-for-divorce-why-i-now-believe-there-are-more-than-two>.

⁹ E.g., Justin, *First Apology* 15 (ANF 1:167); *Shepherd of Hermas* 2.4.1 (ANF 2:21); Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 33 (ANF 2:146-7); Jerome, *Letter* 55:3 (NPNF² 6:110).

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, “No Remarriage After Divorce” in Mark L. Strauss, Paul E. Engle eds., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views, Counterpoints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 28.



Some advocates of this view interpret πορνεία in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 to refer to an unlawful marital union. That is, they suggest πορνεία constitutes a violation of the sexual prohibitions in the holiness code (Lev. 18:6-18; e.g., an incestuous marriage).¹¹ Other permanence advocates view πορνεία as a reference to premarital fornication.¹² Proponents of the permanence view suggest that if adultery had been in view in the relevant passages, Jesus would have used the specific NT term for adultery (μοιχάω). On the permanence view, therefore, marriage is an indissoluble union that may only be undone if the marriage itself constitutes a violation of the moral law.

A modified form of the permanence view permits remarriage in cases of desertion but maintains that adultery does not constitute biblical grounds for divorce. Those who affirm this view interpret the Pauline privilege (i.e., “In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved”) as inclusive of remarriage.¹³ On this view, if a believing spouse is deserted, he or she is no longer bound and may remarry.

The Biblical Basis for a Modified Erasmian View

Whereas Grudem argued for a modified Erasmian view upon the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:15, the author finds his construal unpersuasive. The demonstrative τοιούτοις is most naturally understood as a reference to those who are victims of spousal abandonment and not to other situations irrelevant to the pericope (e.g., physical abuse). That is, “In such cases (i.e., wherein a Christian is abandoned by his or her spouse) the brother or sister is not enslaved.” Grudem’s argument, “If Paul had meant to refer only to desertion, another option would be to use ἐν τούτῳ,” neglects to countenance the pronoun as a reference to instances of desertion rather than desertion per se.

¹¹ J. Carl Laney, “No Divorce & No Remarriage” in H. Wayne House ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1990), 35.

¹² John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 173-4.

¹³ David K. Clark, Robert V. Rakestraw eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics: Issues and Applications*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 227; Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 135-8.



There are, however, good biblical reasons to affirm a modified Erasmian approach to divorce and remarriage. First, Jesus' use of *πορνεία* in the two exception clauses (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) presupposes the context of marriage and thus illicit extra-marital sexual activity. These exception clauses are unlikely to refer to incestuous or otherwise unlawful marriages, given the Jewish-Christian orientation of the Gospel of Matthew. While incest was practiced among Gentiles (Matt. 14:2-4), Jews generally regarded incestuous relationships as an abomination.¹⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison observe that "There is no patristic support for the translation, 'incest'" and that *πορνεία* does not occur in the Septuagintal rendering of Leviticus 17-18.¹⁵ Likely owing to the ambiguity of Deuteronomy 24:1 (e.g., "some indecency"), Jesus used *πορνεία*, a blanket term for sexual immorality.

Second, the specific term "adultery" (*זנות*) is frequently given a figurative meaning in the prophets (e.g., Jer. 3:9; Ezek. 23:37) and is said to have been a legitimate basis for Yahweh's divorce from Israel and Judah (Jer. 3:8; cf. Isa. 50:1). It stands to reason, therefore, that if Israel and Judah's spiritual adultery is a legitimate basis for divorce, then conventional adultery is as well.

Third, neither Matthew 5:32 nor 19:9 preclude remarriage in cases of adultery since Jesus' allowance for divorce in such situations implies permission to remarry. Craig Blomberg observed that "Ancient Jews (like Greeks and Romans) almost universally agreed that lawful divorce granted a person the right to remarry. So Jesus' words [i.e., in Matthew 5:32] would almost certainly have been taken as permission for remarriage when divorce was permitted, i.e., after marital unfaithfulness."¹⁶ Craig Keener similarly noted, "The exception clause is appended to divorce rather than to remarriage because it is the validity of the

¹⁴ William Loader, "'Not as the Gentiles': Sexual Issues at the Interface between Judaism and Its Greco-Roman World," *Religions* 9, no. 9 (2018): 258, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/9/258>.

¹⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 2 Vols., International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 1:530.

¹⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 111.



divorce that establishes the basis for acceptable remarriage.”¹⁷ Likewise, Paul’s admonition that one is “not enslaved” in a case of spousal abandonment implies the freedom to remarry (1 Cor. 7:15).

Aside from adultery or abandonment, one may conceive of an exceptional scenario wherein a divorce may have biblical justification. For example, suppose a spouse engaged in a premeditated murder. In this situation, the guilty individual has committed a crime that ought to result in capital punishment (Gen. 9:5-6).¹⁸ However, due to the lenience of the state, the guilty party is resigned to life in prison. Had the state appropriately wielded the sword, the relevant marriage would have ended, and the surviving spouse would be free to remarry if he or she chose (Rom. 7:2-3). On a modified Erasmian view, the failure of the state to carry out the biblically prescribed punishment may serve as justification for divorce. The principle, then, is that when one engages in sin so heinous that it merits capital punishment, whether that punishment is delivered, the innocent spouse has the option to divorce.

What Crimes Deserve Capital Punishment?

This approach requires clarification on what constitutes a crime worthy of capital punishment within the purview of a biblically informed worldview. The post-diluvian requirement for capital punishment in cases of murder (Gen. 9:5-6) is consistently understood by the biblical writers to be the responsibility of civil government (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:31; Acts 25:11; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). Governmental authority, wrote Paul, is the sword-bearing “punisher” (ἔκδικος)¹⁹ through whom God exercises his wrath upon evildoers (Rom. 13:3-4).

Beyond murder, what other crimes should result in capital punishment from the perspective of a Christian worldview? The *Westminster Confession of Faith*’s affirmation of the abiding “general equity” of the Israelite civil law (§19.4) affords an avenue through

¹⁷ Craig S. Keener, “A Response to Gordon J. Wenham,” in Strauss and Engle eds., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church*, 51.

¹⁸ For an explanation of the biblical rationale for the justness of capital punishment see Bruce W. Ballard, “The Death Penalty: God’s Timeless Standard for the Nations?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 3 (2000): 471-87; Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 507-11.

¹⁹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 301.



which to identify capital punishment-worthy crimes. The phrase “general equity” pertains to the underlying moral principle of civil law, which continuously endures.²⁰ On the one hand, the civil law code is an artifact of a non-existent state. Because these laws were wedded to a particular time, it is inappropriate to assert their unadulterated continuity for today. On the other hand, these civil laws are often judicial applications of moral law, including the penalties therein.

This conclusion is demonstrated by the application of specific civil laws to nations outside of Israel. The inhabitants of the land of Canaan, for example, were detestable in God’s sight due to their practice of especially heinous sins (Lev. 20:23). God judged the people of Canaan for their necromancy, child sacrifice, and sexual sins. He deemed them worthy of death and utilized Israel as his rod of judgment to enact the punishment prescribed in the civil law.

Subsequently, those penal sanctions that prescribe capital punishment in the OT may have some application as it relates to a modified Erasmian view of divorce and remarriage. Sins such as bestiality or witchcraft might be justification for divorce. That is, divorce is never a requirement, even in cases of desertion. However, the permissibility of divorce is broadened by the biblical expectation that the ruling authorities will uphold the moral law and the failure of a state to carry out capital punishment against those who engage in especially heinous crimes.

Conclusion

The various evangelical approaches to divorce and remarriage divulge the problematic nature of these questions. A modified Erasmian viewpoint best accounts for the explicit testimony of Scripture regarding the permissibility of divorce and remarriage within the context of

²⁰ John Macpherson, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1882), 118-20; Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus Pub., 1980), 197. Cf. Gouge’s general equity application of the tithing laws in William Gouge, *A Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. 2, Nichol’s Series of Commentaries (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; J. Nisbet & Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 93, 108.



adultery or spousal abandonment while affording consideration for divorce and remarriage in extraordinary situations wherein a spouse has engaged in a sin worthy of capital punishment.

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